LIMERICK CHRONICLE

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DOWN MEMORY LANE WITH THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST TITLE

'War of the Wagons'

STAGECOACH PIONEER FROM LIMERICK:

This article was published on Saturday, November 12, 1966, to commemorate the 200 year anniversary of the Limerick Chronicle newspaper

An artist's rendering of Andrew Buchanan's Limerick to Dublin Stagecoach of 1784

PERHAPS nothing has done more in our times to dramatise the stagecoach than the Christmas card, with its heart-warming picture of beefy coachmen and crinolined cailins against a background of snow, holly and gaily-decorated Christmas boxes. But in those days the road was rocky and the going tough, and not for the stagecoach only.

In 1784, for instance, when Andrew Buchanan, the Thomondgate man who first regularised road transport fought his "War of the Wagons," minor miscreants were flogged through the streets of Limerick, and bolder once were hanged and quartered. And grinding through the brutality and blood of the muddy roads, Buchanan's wagons wheels turned mileage into money. How he did it is told below.

The distinction of pioneering the first regular stagecoach service in Ireland should go perhaps to a Thomondgate man, John Buchanan. Many years before the great transport genius. Bianconi was born, Buchanan's coach piled the perilous Limerick-Dublin route regularly and punctually braving danger from the elements and from the highwaymen. Not that the highways are safer now: we may travel faster, and more comfortable but more people meet with violent death on the roads in our times than ever the most bloodthirsty highwayman dreamed of!

The Rocky Road

ACCUSTOMED as we are to a complex and efficient transport system we may find it difficult to believe that before Buchanan's day there was no public mode of conveyance in Ireland. Roads were few and bad. The rocky road to Dublin was not then a comic song: it was a perilous reality. In the interest of self-preservation, travellers banded together and relied on their marksmanship or swordsmanship to protect them from the plundering highwaymen.

Buchanan' stagecoach, appropriately named "The Fly," blazed the dangerous Limerick-Dublin route with the first regular service in 1760. Prior to that time, intending travellers met at a coffee room in Quay Lane, and on a particular day being selected to leave, a notice was displayed over a mantelpiece and signed by all the passengers. The journey took as long as five days, and the same horses were used throughout.

Buchanan decided to improve on this slow and irregular transport, and set up his headquarters at a place called the Head Inn in Gerald Griffin Street. This was a fashionable hotel in its day and had as its patrons the famous Mrs Siddons and other stage personalities who visited Limerick.

"The Fly" was a picturesque sight as it passed through Saint John's square, through the Irishtown across Baal's Bridge, through the Englishtown across Thomond Bridge to Killaloe and negotiating part of Keeper Hill on its long route to Dublin.

Change of route

THE journey was completed punctually in four days by "The Fly." This gave travellers an extra day in the Capital. An even greater improvement was affected a short time after by using a lightly built coach and having relays of ready-harnessed horses at appointed halts. These and other improvements enabled the journey to be made in three days, but a coach called "The Balloon" and the driver was a very proud man indeed to have covered so great a distance in what was then considered so short a time.

Twenty years elapsed before any further any further changes of note took place, and it was not until 1790 that an analysis "The Fly and "The Balloon's" performances resulted in further alterations and improvements.

Amongst these, the route was changed and the and the road newly constructed. Instead of going across Thomond Bridge and by Killaloe, the coach proceeded by Clare Street and direct to Nenagh. This route was responsible for reducing the Limerick-Dublin journey to two days. It was ultimately completed in one day, but this necessitated a cock-crow start and a late arrival. This was certainly no mean achievement when we consider that the roads were very few and badly engineered. In their planning, no care was taken to avoid hills or cut through them. If they were planned by Englishmen, we might slightly alter Chestertown's lines to read "The Rolling English drunkard made the rolling Irish roads!"

Also, they were so indifferently constructed and so badly cared for that in bad weather long stretched were impassable.

The First Coach

BUCHANAN'S first coach had a hard job to do, and consequently, it was very large and heavy in its construction. The horses too were harnessed after the same style, and many unnecessary steps and buckles were used which were afterwards dispensed with

When stagecoaches were first established, the mails were conveyed from Limerick to Dublin three times a week. They were carried in saddlebags places at each side of a horse, which was ridden by a courier who travelled a fixed distance, usually ten miles.

A fresh man and horse then took over, and they were so relayed until they reached their destination. The relief, however, very often took the form of a highwayman who was not by any means the colourful gallant which Hollywood would have us believe!

Were Buchanan with us in this age of space travel, his eyes, long closed in sleep would open very wide indeed: but we would, of course, avoid giving him a trip in the night mall!

"The Fly" was a picturesque sight as it passed through Saint John's square, through the Irishtown across Baal's Bridge

The War of the Wagons

BUSILY grinding through the muddy roads, Buchanan's wagon wheels turned mileage into money. Then the competitors came, and his sides darkened for a while. The advertisements quoted in this account of "The War of the Wagons" are taken from the "Limerick Chronicle" file for 1784.

This year was a particularly trying year for Buchanan, when a company Messrs. Foster and Osborne, with headquarters in Dublin, decided to exploit the profitable Limerick-Dublin route.

The following announcement and rates of carriage published on March 25 1784, surely caused his sword to rattle in his scabbard:

"A compleat new covered Broad-Wheel stage waggon erected from the best English modell for the carriage of goods and passengers from Dublin to Limerick in five days setts off from the proprietors no 31 Mary's Abbey, Dublin, every second Thursday.

Orders received at their office as above; at Mr Andrew Watson's Limerick: Mr Barry Smith, Nenagh and Mr Reynolds in Roscrea. The Public may depend on the strictest integrity and attention from the Proprietors one of whom will attend on the road constantly.

Rates of Carriage:

MERCHANTS' Goods, 3s. 6d. per cwt.

Small packages of Parcels under 56 lb. One-half penny per lb.

Passengers with 14 lbs. Luggage through all or any part of the Road, One Penny per mile.

Stages at Newbridge Maryborough, Roscrea, Nenagh and Limerick.

It will arrive in Limerick the first time on Wednesday, the twenty-fourth inst."

That Mob Again!

HOWEVER then, as now labour jealousies had to be overcome. Maybe the trouble was fomented by Buchanan, who was a keen businessman. The truculent-carmen were aroused to action, and the Dublin company found it necessary to issue the following assurance on March 29, shrewdly inclusion in it an advertisement for a partner who would reside in the enemy camp:

"It has been conjectured that the Limerick Stage Waggon would meet with opposition from the Carmen or mob, the Proprietors think it necessary to acquaint the Public that there is a Bill now going

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Limerick and the stagecoach days

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through parliament and will immediately pass into a law, which, effectively secures the said Waggon and all goods contained therein, to the owners and for punishing all persons attempting to impede the same: also to regulate the rolls at the turnpike fares in this Kingdom. The proprietors wishing to render this undertaking as extensively as possible will have another Waggon erected shortly: and wants a Resident Partner in Limerick, immediately. Apply to the Printer, hereof, or by letter to Messrs Doster Osborne and Co., No 31 Mary's Abbey."

Meredith Moves In

THIS advertisement resulted in a Mr Meredith being taken into partnership, and he moved in Limerick with his family-:

"The Proprietors of the Stage Waggon beg leave to acquaint the Publick that they have taken a Commodious Concern at the Square, with convenient stabling stores, etc.m for to carry on their business: and that they have taken into Partnership Mr Meredith, who was with family now resides there. All orders will be thankfully received by him, and the foods sent for and delivered. Passengers may depend on the Waggon going into Dublin the morning of the Sixth Day, Limerick May 24 1784.

Buchanan Begs Leave

BUCHANAN countered this seven weeks later with the following reminder:-

"Henry Buchanan begs leave to inform the Publick that he has an excellent Coach and two Post Chaises: and having got an additional number of stout horses, will be ready at the shortest notice to set out for any part of the Kingdom. As his drivers are remarkable for Sobriety and his Prices moderate he hopes to merit the countenance of the Publick."

A lesser light in Thomondgate also had designs on the 'countenance of the Publick'":

"A Post Chaise with Able Horses, Will set out for Dublin any time agreeable to Passengers between this day and next Thursday apply to John Halloran, Thomondgate, July 22, 1784."

A postillion (one who rides or guides the first pair of horses of a coach or post chaise) would occasionally take French leave, and one can well see fire flashing from the irate eyes of Mr Powell as he drafted this notice:

"I caution the public against Hiring Jeremiah Cusack (Postillon) having run away from my service on Saturday, 31 of July last, without giving up any provocation whatever, Limerick August, 2 1784-C Powell."

All was fair then in the stagecoach wars and if passengers could, by foul means be induced to patronise Messrs. Foster and Osborne nobody really worried except perhaps Andrew Buchanan:

Whereas a Report has been injuriously propagated that Limerick Stage Coach was stopped on Friday last, by Four Footpads, and one of the Passengers robbed of Three Guineas: the Proprietor of the said Coach thinks it necessary to inform the publick that the said Report is without foundation and calculated to injure him in the Estimation of the Publick, to whom he holds himself highly indebted for the preference given to his Carriages: he further begs to observe that neither on that day nor at any other time since the Commencement, have the Passengers in the Limerick Stage met with the least Accident, either from Robbers or otherwise, as can be proved by Affidavit, September 15, 1784.

Bianconi Stagecoaches stopped at Cruise's hotel, but their forerunner Buchanan's Coaches departed for Dublin from the Head Inn on Gerald Griffin Street

Meredith Moves out

HOWEVER, Buchanan was winning the Battle of 1784, and Benjamin Meredith, partner in the firm of Messrs. Foster and Osborne, found the going not at all to his liking.

And so, these competitors in transport slipped like a sodden bus ticket down history's drainpipe

"Whereas a Partnership was entered into in the month of May last between William Osborne, Francis Foster, Robert M Murray, all of the City of Dublin, Gentlemen and Benjamin Meredith, then of Kilboy in the County of Tipperary, Gent., to Convey Merchants, Goods and other Articles by Land Carriage from said City of Dublin to the City of Limerick and other parts of the Kingdom of Ireland Now I, the said Benjamin Meredith, one of said partners, do hereby give notice that I have withdrawn myself from the said Partnership, and that same has lately been dissolved with respect to me and do therefore caution the Publick not to accept of any Bills or Notes or to give any Credit on account of said Partnership upon my credit, as I have withdrawn my name therefrom, and am in no manner Concerned therein, Dated this 25 October 1784.

The Travail Of Transport

AND so Benjamin Meredith went home to Kilboy. The end? Well just about. It came rather ingloriously seventeen days later:

"To be sold by Edward Gubbins, Coachmaker, outside the bins, Coachmaker outside the Square, Limerick, the remarkable large New Waggon, which lately ran from Dublin to this City: it would answer well for Drawing Turf, Corn, etc. and will save the purchaser in the Carriage of such articles 16 or 18 Horses a Day. Likewise complete, Harness for eight Horses. It will be sold for less than half the Original Cost Nov. 1, 1784."

And so, these competitors in transport slipped like a sodden bus ticket down history's drainpipe.